Henry Dyson, Director

Advice for Goldwater Letters of Recommendation

Thank you for taking the time to write a letter of recommendation for the Goldwater Scholarship. The quality of a candidate's letters is a very important factor in whether or not s/he is selected as one of U-Mnominees and wins a scholarship in the national competition. Below are some features of strong letters that the U-M Goldwater Committee has seen over the years.

Establish Context, Personal Knowledge, and Sincerity

Goldwater letters typically come from science course instructors or research supervisors. State the context in which you know the student and establish that you have specific, personal knowledge of the student's performance and career aspirations. Whenever possible, include concrete stories about your professional interactions with the student. These are the most effective means of conveying a sense of personal knowledge and sincerity in your recommendation and can be very powerful with readers. If youthink that you don't have enough personal knowledge about the student's background and career aspirations - which is quite common for instructors of large science courses - the candidate should provide a copy of her/his application and set up an appointment to discuss these items with you.

Future Research Potential

The mission of the Goldwater Scholarship is to promote future research scientists in STEM fields. Provide information that supports the candidate's sincere commitment to and aptitude for research. Statethe likelihood that this candidate will make significant contributions to the field. The most successful letters cite current examples of the students work as evidence of aptitude, ability, and commitment that will carry the student forward into a significant research career. One effective way of projecting the student into this future trajectory is by comparing the student favorably to other undergraduates, graduatestudents, or post-doc you've known you have gone on to successful graduate and professional careers.

Make the Case for Excellence

Goldwater candidates typically have a 3.9 or better GPA, have made significant contributions to research,are considered the very best in their departments or cohorts, and have strong potential for graduate schooland future careers. The purpose of the letter is to explain why you think this candidate fits that profile.

Be specific about the qualities that impress you (intelligence, understanding, insightfulness, speed, commitment, ability to work independently, technical skills, communication skills, teamwork and personality, etc.) Back up your comments with specific examples or anecdotes about your professionalinteractions with the student whenever possible.

Explicit Comparisons
At some point in the letter, typically in the first or final paragraphs, you should be explicit about the scaleagainst which you are comparing the applicant. Obviously, you will want to select the best scale against which you can favorably compare the applicant with integrity. Examples might include: "The best undergraduate in our department," "One of the best students I've encountered in 20 years of teaching at
U-M [and other peer institutions]," "Compares favorably with previous Goldwater [or comparable
scholarships] winners for whom I've written letters." If you've assigned the student an A+ in your course, you may want to say something about what that distinction means (e.g., if only one A+ assigned in the course).

FERPA and Submission Instructions

For the U-M nomination process, the candidate is responsible for providing you with instructions for electronic letter submission. U-M applicants must complete an online FERPA waiver before their recommenders can submit a letter to ONSF. The candidate should provide a copy of this FERPA waiver with you indicating whether they have waived their access to the letter (i.e., whether or not it will be confidential). Letters of recommendation will be treated as confidential and will not be released to the student without your permission unless the student's FERPA waiver indicates otherwise. If you have questions about ONSF's FERPA policy, please see this page or contact us directly.

The FERPA waive also includes the instructions for submitting your letter of recommendation to ONSF via Qualtrics. If you have not seen a FERPA release from the student you are recommending, please ask the student for a copy. Once submitted, your letter will be added to the student's electronic application file to be reviewed by the U-M STEM Research Career Awards Selection Committee.

ONSF may reach out to you if there are questions or concerns regarding your letter of recommendation or if a deadline has passed and your letter has not been received.

Note: We only upload letters to the Goldwater Foundation for our four selected nominees. If the applicant is nominated, we will be in touch with further instructions.

If you have any questions or concerns about your letter; or feel that you may not be the best letter writerfor this candidate and would like to discuss the matter confidentially, please feel free to contact Henry Dyson directly at hdyson@umich.edu.